

The TBWC at Twenty Five Years old,

By Mike McGirr

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Twenty five years ago a solitary fisherman could be observed night fishing from a canoe in the Thunder Bay River. He would often return with a limit of Walleyes and no one knew for a while where he was catching them. Finally some curious fishermen saw him casting lures around the lighthouse and following his lead, they too began to catch fish. Soon it became crowded and fisherman began to look for other places to fish. They discovered they could cast from shore behind the Yacht Club, fish the entrance to the cement plant, and eventually that led them to the grass island reef and beyond. Those were the hay days when multiple limits of 4 to 6 lb walleyes were the norm.

About this time two crazy walleye fisherman were hollering Dubuque, Dubuque at each other (site of the Master Walleye Championship in Iowa that year), and began talking about starting a Walleye Club. There obviously was a lot of interest in Walleye fishing in our area and maybe there would be others interested in having a club that would target Walleyes.

Calls were made to the different media outlets to announce a meeting that was set to happen at the McRae Park hall. This meeting would be held to judge the interest in forming a Walleye club. To our surprise the McRae park hall was jammed that evening with little standing room available. No doubt about it, there was a lot of interest, so right then and there, that night, the club was formed, officers were elected and we were on our way to becoming a new fishing club in Northern Michigan.

Mike McGirr contacted the Saginaw Bay Walleye Club to see how they operated. Dan LaCross who was elected to the board offered a copy of the Sportsman's club bylaws, and with a few changes they were made to apply to walleye fishing. In March of 1990 the Thunder Bay Walleye was established.

Mike McGirr was the first president for 8 years, Denny Burns and Jackie Oliver, officers from the start and still active tournament people, Jim Leesburg, President now and has been for many years, Dave Birmingham, still an officer who was the crazy guy hollering Dubuque at me. Joyce O'Donnell our first Treasurer, Carl Kelly who has led many of the programs we now have, Darwin Grabow who organizes the kid's tournament every year. Without the unselfish help from our membership none of the success this club has had would be possible.

JAMES FARM WALLEYE REARING POND

Contact was made by Dave Birmingham and Mike McGirr with the DNR Gaylord inland fisheries manager and a meeting was held at the DNR building on M32. TBWC's help was offered and the DNR responded that they could use help managing the James Farm Pond. It was filled then with a diesel tractor and pump that took over a week to fill. The DNR would have their men drive from Gaylord every day to run the tractor/pump and then return home. Our club volunteered to run it at night so the pond would fill faster and it would save the DNR personnel many unproductive hours on the road. After a few years of that type of filling they mentioned that they had a pump and would pay for a power line to come the last 1/4 mile, if we could figure how to use the pump. One of our club members said he had access to a large 6' by 20' oil tank that we could get for free. Dan LaCross contacted Presque Isle Corporation and they donated the 12 inch pipe we needed for the inlet from the river and the 6 inch pipe for the outlet to the pond. Plans were made, the date was set and the DNR came with a large contractor size back hoe to dig the hole to place the tank on end in the ground and trenches for the piping. Members of the club placed the pipes, Bill Fetter a retired electrician that belonged to the club, did the electrical installation and with the flip of a switch we had water flowing from the river into the pond. Time filling was reduced from 7 days to about 3 days and no one had to be there to monitor the tractor. After the new pump installation our club would be contacted by the DNR when the boards to the dam were installed and the pump was started by the TBWC. All they had to do then was wait until we notified them that the pond was full and ready for the fry to be planted in the pond.

Every year since we were formed, we have had club volunteers on hand to harvest the Walleyes when they grew to a sufficient size. Initially we had to scoop up the Walleyes with nets as they flowed through the Wolf trap placed between the pond dam and the river as the water was lowered. It was very labor intensive taking 2-3 8 hr. days during this process and the DNR really appreciated our help. 10 to 15 members would show up to harvest and weigh the Walleyes into the DNR truck to be planted in various lakes and rivers in the northern Lower Peninsula as well as Lake Huron. They are now chased with chemicals into trap nets strung along the shoreline of the pond which reduced harvest time to about 3 hours each day.

We still help, but as a further bonus for the DNR and the members that show up, we host a Walleye lunch. Steve Hubert cooks walleye of course and Pam Hubert supplies the salads that make the lunch a success. Carl Kelly still mows the area of operation. Every year I notice more DNR people showing up and I have a suspicion that word has gotten around what a great lunch that they provide. Because of this pond and our help, every year 100 to 200 thousand Walleyes are planted in the surrounding area. It could be that some of the fish we have for that lunch came from the Walleyes we harvested 3 or 4 years earlier!

OTHER CLUB ACTIVITIES

Since those early years the TBWC has become involved in many other community projects that are fishing related. We built the fishing platform on the Island Mill, provided and installed the dock above the seven mile dam, and every year host a fishing contest for kids at the Lafarge Quarry on m-32. The past few years we have been an integral part of the Reel Fun Fishing Tournament on Grand Lake drilling 1200 holes and running the tourney the following day. We are one the clubs that help make the Brown Trout Festival a success, and now the BT has a Walleye Tournament as part of the week long fishing contest. We host fishing seminars every year to help our members become better Walleye fishermen, and if you attend any of our tournaments, you will see how improved and professional our members have become. We even have two members, Erich Carlson and Wayne Vandyke that went on to win National and World Walleye Championships.

Walleye fishing in the bay has greatly changed since 1990, but our members have adapted and found new areas and methods that produce Walleyes. Our dues still remain at \$15 a year and for anyone that wants to become a better fisherman and catch Walleyes, it is money well spent.

I hesitate to start naming people because you always forget some who really deserve credit for the success of the club, but here goes.

This is only a snap shot of the Thunder Bay Walleye Club. Much goes on behind the obvious that can never be heralded enough.